



The interview with Lucine Kasbarian — a Diaspora born American-Armenian — concluded just as I arrived in Armenia in April 2016, and the war between Azeri forces and Artsakh Armenians reignited. As I started editing Lucine's interview which focused on the brutalities that unfolded during the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and the path of forced marches that Lucine had retraced through the desert of Der Zor, Syria — there was news of the beheading of an Armenian soldier by Azeri forces in Artsakh. Surely, this was not 1915 — but war against the Armenians and Christians both in Artsakh and Syria was raging once again

with brutalities bearing resemblance to those from 101 years ago.

Lucine's interview reflects the true effects of war and genocide on future generations. Having grown up with parents and grandparents who recalled memories of the horrors they had lived through during the Armenian Genocide of 1915 surely shaped Lucine's psyche (as it has countless others), her choices in life and the missions she has set for herself both as an artist and a Diaspora Armenian.

Tell me about yourself - where did you grow up, and what were the first influences of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 in your life?

I'm the second generation to be born in the U.S. since the Genocide drove my grandparents from our homeland. They were first-hand witnesses of the Genocide, but had passed on by the time I was five. I do recall, at that age, talking with my parents about where our family came from, how we came to live in the U.S., our family tree, and what had happened to our other relatives. These talks became a springboard for more family discussions about the Genocide.

How and why did you decide to travel to the killing fields of Der Zor in northeast Syria?

In 2010 the Eastern Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America announced that it was organizing a group pilgrimage to Syria and Lebanon to visit places that were historically, culturally and spiritually significant to the Armenian people. I signed up immediately. This was pre-Syrian war.

I decided to go to let our departed ancestors know that they had not been forgotten and were, in fact, with us in spirit every day. I wanted to feel closer to them and identify with what they had gone through as they were driven — barefoot and stripped naked, starving and frightened — through treacherous mountain ranges, to a desolate place where, if they were still breathing, the Turks intended them to die agonizing deaths. I wanted to let my forebears know — as I recalled those Armenians whose tongues and teeth were torn out and feet cut off — that we,

the grandchildren of survivors, mindfully use our tongues to speak our native language, our voices to sing the folk songs of our elders, and our feet to perform the dances of our native villages. I wanted to let our ancestors know that the Armenian soul and our dreams of liberty, even in exile, did not die with them. It was a very solemn trip.

Describe the emotions you felt as you set foot upon the desert soil of Der Zor.

The day we went to Der Zor was blazing hot. It happened to fall 95 years and just a few days shy of when the first Armenian death marches began arriving in Der Zor in 1915. The searing heat forced me to visualize what our ancestors went through in these open-air concentration camps where no sustenance or shelter was provided. The Turks meant to herd their victims into this inferno to expire. I envisioned how Armenians consumed anything they could find —grass, urine, human flesh — their skeletal bodies competing for space with rotting carcasses—all under the gaze of Turkish gendarmes.

What was I feeling? A sort of desolation, heaviness, misery and blankness. I thought about how the lifeless bodies of our ancestors found respite here, even if their immortal spirits did not. I stared at the sand and, through my tears, quietly sang “Hahnk-jeh-tsek,” or “May You Rest,” an Armenian repose of the souls.

Did any of your extended family members actually die at DerZor?

Yes. My maternal great-grandmother died of exhaustion and starvation at Der Zor in the arms of her 14 year-old daughter—my grandmother Armaveni who buried her mother’s body herself. And my two paternal aunts — only infants at the time—died of starvation and exposure there. They were buried in the sands by their mother, my paternal grandmother, Lusia.

Like many who have visited the Der Zor area, were you tempted to dig into the soil to find remnants of your ancestors?

I did get on my hands and knees and sift through the sand to try to imagine what our ancestors felt. But I did not expect to find bones. You see, after 2005, the human remains there were no longer protected. A waterworks project that used bulldozers permanently disturbed the Margadeh mass grave. The Syrian caves of Shadadeh, where Armenians were burned alive en masse, had been closed off and tampered with for oil exploration. The mass graves of Armenians at Ras al-Ain —where locals refuse to eat produce grown above the human remains — has been demolished by hired hands.

We’ve lost a massive source of primary evidence of the Genocide as well as access to these hallowed sites. Now with so-called ISIS overrunning the region, almost everything is either destroyed or impossible to reach. The Der Zor Armenian Memorial Church, Museum and Archives - with a formidable repository of bones that comprised an enduring totem for the Armenian people - was bombed in 2014. I don’t know how much of it has been preserved.

Elyse Semerdjian, Professor of Middle East History at Whitman College, spoke eloquently about Armenian bones at Der Zor. She said, “We would be doing historians and archaeologists a great

favor if we discouraged tourists from digging up those bones [of Armenian martyrs] since the archeological sites have already been deeply compromised. If ever a full excavation is done at Margadeh and other places, we will never know accurate numbers of the dead because of the pilfering of bones by Armenians themselves. This undermines the very history we seek to preserve...I suggest that we think about Margadeh as a giant grave and treat it as such."

It's amazing that those artifacts have lasted as long as they have.

Even today's Armenia is endangered by hostile neighbors. Christian Armenia - with a population of about 2 million - is sandwiched between 80 million Muslim Turks in Turkey and 9 million Azeris in Azerbaijan. Armenians have never been a protected species, even on their historic lands. As evidence, we need only point to the 20th century's Azeri massacres of Armenians in Nakhichevan and Artsakh/Karabakh, not to mention the Turkish genocide in Western Armenia. In these times of unrest, if Turkey annexes Northern Syria and Armenian mass graves come under Turkish control, will they be completely destroyed the way that the New Julfa Armenian cemetery in Nakhichevan was by the Azeri military?

Having been present in the Armenian Church where the remnants of the Genocide martyrs were preserved, how do you feel about the recent systematic ravaging by ISIS in that area? How do you feel about the destruction of these historic monuments?

A report released by the Knights of Columbus details that so-called ISIS is engaged in a genocide against the region's ancient Christian minorities. Recently, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously condemned as genocide the ongoing crimes against Christians — that includes Armenians and Assyrians—as well as other religious minorities in the Middle East by adopting H.Con.Res.75. It faces opposition from the White House, perhaps because the latter knows that the U.S. and its allies—particularly Turkey — bear a certain responsibility for the genocide by supplying weapons and recruits to ISIS and radical groups in Syria.

The cycle of genocide is obvious and appalling. Grandparents told today's Armenian, Assyrian, Chaldean and Greek grandchildren about the horrors that took place from 1894 to 1923 through the stories they relayed. And today's Christian refugees and survivors from the Middle East will be the grandparents of tomorrow, relaying similar tales of devastation to their grandchildren.

My political cartoons along these lines pose questions in light of the parallels between historic events and what's unfolding in the Middle East today. Domsday Scenario asks whether Armenians, as an endangered species, will one day become extinct as a people. In Finish the Job, Turkish President Erdogan taunts Armenians in Kessab, Syria with the specter of a renewed genocide. And in The Anti-Christ as Foretold, I visualize the ongoing genocide of ancient Christian communities in the Middle East, while in Snake in the Grass, I draw parallels between the Christian genocides of yesterday and today.

According to an [authoritative paper](#) issued in 2015 by the Institute for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University, Turkey is supporting armed radical groups, including ISIS, in the continuing war in Syria. There is evidence that the U.S. and Israel are involved, as

well. Compounding the problems is how the Western public is being misled about who is causing the destruction in Syria.

Is it a coincidence that so many Armenian sites in Syria have been destroyed? It's as if the Turkish authorities and their mercenaries are saying, 'We will not allow you to live in your native or adoptive communities, nor live in peace and dignity, honor and mourn your dead, house their bones, maintain your culture, long for your homeland, or prove what injustices were and are being carried out against you.'

The erasure of proof — physical remains and historical documents—is a continuation, and the final act, of genocide.

Name a few examples of these destructions.

On September 21, 2014, so-called ISIS destroyed the Armenian Church, Genocide Memorial, Museum and Archive of Der Zor. Other sites in Syria where we paid homage during the 2010 pilgrimage have been attacked or destroyed as well. They include the Der Zor suspension bridge over the Euphrates; the Armenian Church of the 40 Martyrs in Aleppo; the Armenian enclave of Kessab; and ancient Eastern Orthodox Christian sites such as the Saidnaya, Ma'aloula and Mar Sarkis Monasteries.

Make no mistake — these acts of barbarism are intended to destroy us physically, psychologically and spiritually. As we Armenians and other targeted groups hold on to our dreams of returning to our homelands, we must remember that Christianity and Armenia can continue to live within us, no matter where we pray or live. According to Ermenihaber.am, in 2011, Turkey paid the Muslim Brotherhood over \$1 million to burn archives, housed in the Institute of Egypt, which documented the Armenian Genocide. The Cairo-based Veto newspaper says that these documents would harm Turkey in international courts.

Interviews conducted with Kessab Armenians in 2014 confirm that the militants who invaded, looted and occupied their homes and threatened their lives had crossed the Turkish border with Syria, openly passing through Turkish military lines and spoke Turkish. Coincidence?

As mentioned earlier, on Armenian Independence Day, September 21, 2014, we learned that the Armenian Genocide Memorial Church and Museum complex in Der Zor was bombed. Coincidence?

The magnificent Armenian Church of the 40 Martyrs in Aleppo was bombed on April 29, 2015, one day after a lawsuit was announced in which the Armenian Prelacy sought to reclaim its original headquarters in Sis, Turkey, formerly Western Armenia. Coincidence?

Do we need further proof that Turkey is on the attack, deliberately trying to erase Armenian history and prevent a reckoning of that history?

You witnessed young boys jumping off a bridge into the Euphrates River — the same bridge

where decades earlier countless Armenians jumped to their death to avoid rape, murder, and torture by the Ottoman soldiers.

During the Genocide that bridge was only in the beginning phases of construction. Building began in the 1920s and was not completed until the 1940s. In fact, an Armenian oversaw the construction. However, women and girls stalked by Turks did indeed approach the banks of the Euphrates there and flung themselves into the waters.

Our group gathered on this suspension bridge, which is several kilometers from the Der Zor desert to watch a dozen or so local Syrian boys seemingly seeking amusement and relief from the heat. They perched themselves about 25 meters above the water, on the rails and cables of the bridge. As we ceremoniously tossed flowers into the Euphrates, these boys began to jump into the river. This eerily recalled for many of us the Armenian girls and women who, during the Genocide, committed suicide by throwing themselves into these very waters to avoid rape and abduction by Turks.

In May 2013, three years after our pilgrimage, the Der Zor suspension bridge was destroyed. We often say that denial of a genocide is like a double killing. I will add that repeatedly destroying the same place has the same effect.

What's the symbolism of the Euphrates River for you—in your psyche—having grown up as a descendant of Armenian Genocide victims and survivors?

Many Armenians, including myself, see the Euphrates as a Christian 'burial ground' for Armenian women and girls who preferred suicide rather than submit to rape, abduction, slavery, forced conversion to Islam and forced marriages at the hands of the Turks. The Euphrates is a holy sacrificial site where Armenians chose death over renouncing their Christian faith.

Recalling how Christians were considered by many Turks to be no better than chattel is a reminder of the intolerance and racial or religious supremacism that often persists to this day. In Syria today, Christian women and girls are once again being raped, abducted, enslaved, converted and forced into marriages by their captors. It is a phenomenon that begs to be addressed.

Let me add that radical Islam and Islam are not synonymous. Armenians who began anew in foreign lands—Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and elsewhere—became productive members of their host nations and maintained very good relations with their Muslim neighbors, though in some cases in the lands mentioned above, civil wars compelled Armenians and other minority groups to flee.

Do you feel powerless amidst such powerful forces as ISIS, causing such massive damages to our civilizations' most historic and sacred sites?

At a time when the outer, material trappings of our faith, culture and civilization are being destroyed, it is important to remain spiritually strong. Our ancestors did this when they faced a strange new lands, grief and trauma. They erected churches and community centers in exile and continued to preserve and practice the traditions of their ancestors. In doing so, they carried

their nation within them. We, too, can and must do this. My cartoon The Anti-Christ As Foretold, features the bombed Armenian Genocide Memorial Church. Once more, we Armenians are in a battle for our existence. To shrink from this battle out of depression or discouragement is to let down our ancestors, our culture, and our faith.

What's your take on the political environment that has brought about the creation of ISIS and the superpowers' tolerance of such atrocities?

We are watching an attempted remaking of the Middle East in a way that suits the wishes of the U.S., Europe, and their allies, including Turkey and Israel. It's not clear, however, that they will succeed. It is a Great Game involving geopolitics, land grabs, oil and gas, and the desire by some to create a neo-Ottoman Empire and/or a Greater Israel.

What's it like to live with the pain of carrying the legacy of an unrecognized Genocide which lingers in the psyche of many generations?

Just because the Genocide happened 100 years ago does not lessen the gravity or the repercussions of the crime. Nor does it mean that we cease being or feeling like exiles. There is no statute of limitations on genocide. My Armenian identity represents a set of customs and beliefs from a civilization that could have become extinct. Because these were passed down at great cost, I owe it to my ancestors to preserve them.

Zero in on you, Lucine Kasbarian, and the personal and professional choices you have made that are directly affected by this legacy.

I try to live an Armenian life as best I can and to be a goodwill ambassador for Armenia in my activities. For years, I worked with the Land & Culture Organization to help rebuild historic monuments and sites on Armenian lands.

I seek out others with whom to speak our endangered Western Armenian dialect.

I boycott goods produced in Turkey -- I will not enrich an economy that continues to reap the fruits of the crime of genocide.

My decision to be a full-time caregiver to my mother is part of a debt I am paying to my parents and ancestors who sacrificed so much so that I could be here today.

As a descendant of the Armenian Genocide survivors — are modern day conflicts and massacres in the Middle East reminiscent of what your ancestors went through in the 1800s and then again in the early 1900s?

Syrian Armenians who fled to Armenia in recent years have reportedly said, "We are the descendants of those who survived the 1915 Genocide. We fear history is repeating itself."

Extremist militias — guided by Turkey and others — made a bee-line for the ancient Christian communities of Syria and Iraq. Historically, Armenians build, Turkey destroys, and Armenians rebuild. This is the pattern. One must be spiritually strong to rebuild with determination when

the efforts seem to be continually thwarted or ruined.

The ancient Christian communities of the Middle East know what is at stake. Last year, when Mariam, [a 10 year-old Assyrian girl](#) displaced from the Nineveh Plains in Iraq, was reunited with her best friend Sandra via TV satellite, she uttered “Don’t cry” in Aramaic—her mother tongue and the language of Jesus. By simply doing what came naturally—and citing a biblical passage [Luke 7:13] —she was carrying on the traditions of her ancestors, even in exile. Her words became a rallying cry and inspiration for all displaced Assyrians seeking comfort in their time of peril.

How does the Genocide and the other genocides occurring today affect me? A book titled Political Ponerology describes sociopaths who are ruling and ruining many nations in our world. I have no doubt that state-sponsored genocides past and present have been set into motion by sociopaths. This knowledge helps me understand what humanity is up against as many nations and cultures face obliteration even today.

Massacred and displaced people must remember who they are and keep telling their stories, especially when those with vested interests urge them to ‘get over it.’ We’re talking about our very identities, legacies and futures.

Today, there is an effort by certain powers to neutralize, co-opt or simply get rid of Armenia — which is considered an impediment and even a nuisance to the Great Game they’re playing in the Caucasus and Near East. As a result, the future of my homeland is in jeopardy — particularly by Pan-Turkism — just as it was 100 years ago.

When did you start reflecting on your anger — and political views—in cartoons?

What is this ‘anger’ all about? It is not simply that we Armenians endured genocide. We were, for centuries, an occupied people. A long-existing civilization in Western Armenia was mostly destroyed and much of what was not destroyed was mis-appropriated as being Turkish.

The 1915-1923 genocide was actually the third Armenian genocide by Turkey in modern history, the first in the mid-1890s and the second in 1909.

Yet Turkey is unrepentant. Turkey today maintains an intolerant attitude towards the indigenous peoples whom it conquered. The Turkish government still enjoys the fruits of its crimes against those peoples. Unfortunately, Turkey not only gets away with this because of the tacit approval of the major powers—East and West—but these same powers support Turkey politically, economically, and militarily. In fact, right now, we can observe superpower nations giving in to Turkey’s blackmail. The EU is paying Turkey handsomely ostensibly to prevent the flow of Syrian refugees into Europe—refugees Turkey had a hand in creating.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, we have witnessed how, for strategic reasons, many nations

champion Turkey and Azerbaijan as bastions of democracy. And all the while, they scapegoat Turkey's victim groups such as Armenians, Kurds, and Alevis.

Is all of this not enough to enrage anyone?

By fruits of the crime, I mean such things as the illegally confiscated Armenian wealth and properties that after World War I created the backbone of what is today the Turkish upper and middle classes.

Does the average person know that Hasan Jemal — Genocidist Jemal Pasha's grandson — still lives in the Armenian mansion that Turkey gifted to his grandfather for his participation in the Genocide even while the grandson talks about making amends to Armenians?

Does the average person know that the US and NATO-affiliated Incirlik Air Base in Turkey was built on the Bezdikian Farm illegally confiscated during the Armenian Genocide?

My cartooning about the Armenian Question began when Ogun Samast, a Turkish ultra-nationalist, murdered Hrant Dink — the editor of weekly English-Turkish newspaper Agos in Turkey — in broad daylight. Dink was an ethnic Armenian citizen of Turkey, born in 1954 in Malatya. He devoted his life to encouraging peaceful coexistence among the various peoples in Turkey. He spoke often about the need to uphold free speech and openly discuss the Armenian Genocide without reprisal if Turkish society were to evolve and grow. When he was murdered for his views, I chose political cartooning as a productive way to deal with and make a statement about injustice.

How did you come about to choose political cartoons as your tool/media to channel your creativity?

I had been making art for a long time, but it had taken a back seat to publishing and political activism. Cartooning gave me the chance to return to art and combine many of my interests — drawing, history, current events, wordplay, and confronting double standards. Cartoons can say in one image what it would take pages to say in words.

How are you empowered by your cartoons?

Political cartoonists in general empower me when they bring important issues to the fore. When I complete a cartoon that I believe sheds light on injustice in an ironic or humorous way, it helps me lighten up and feel ready to return to 'fight another day.' Political cartoons can engage people who may not be politically active or informed. It's a good way to reach a wider audience.

What's the overarching message that's common to all your cartoons?

They nearly all touch on the Armenian Cause. I want to spotlight realities and hypocrisies that do not receive adequate coverage in mainstream media and to drive points home in ironic ways.

How do you think the atrocities that are a part of your nation's history affect you as an individual? As an artist?

The title of my new cartoon publication, "[Perspectives from Exile](#)" reflects how I live every day with the loss of my ancestors and our native homeland. Since I carry Armenia within me, an assault on Armenia is an assault on me.

Our history and life experience has taught me that we must be on guard. This is difficult if one's natural disposition is to be kind. Many of us believe that one reason Armenians have a reputation for being so polite and perhaps overly 'nice' is that under Turkish rule, Armenians had to keep their heads down or risk being beheaded.

Pathological narcissism has been a plague on humanity since time immemorial. Jesus was the victim of it. Today, it is the epidemic of our times. Truth-tellers risk contempt, vilification and even death. Armenian activists face this in their work. Giving up is never an option.

How are you standing up against atrocities and wars of our times—armed with your cartoons? Do you think they make an impact? Do they reverse public opinion? Give examples of instances when this was clearly evident and how that made you feel as an artist.

My main activity has turned to elder caregiving. But with the time available, I try to do my part as a cartoonist, journalist and activist.

On the occasions that these cartoons have appeared in non-Armenian media, some readers have posted comments such as "thank you for presenting your work. I was unaware of this."

I have gotten the same sort of response from those who viewed my cartoons as part of group exhibitions during the recent Armenian Genocide centennial.

I consider it a form of direct action activism when I send my cartoons to mainstream media outlets. I do so knowing that these outlets—the notoriously biased Economist magazine among them—would never consider publishing them. But I put these images in front of editors to inform them and remind them of their biases.

People from many backgrounds — Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks, Israelis, Kurds, Palestinians, Turks — have "liked" my cartooning page on [Facebook](#) and commented favorably. If these cartoons can help people assess, weigh and consider—and ultimately act to bring about positive change—then I have done my job.

What does the future hold for you and your political activism through political cartooning?

I am working on other projects that use cartoons as a way to tell a story. As long as I can tackle issues that are ignored or misrepresented by the mainstream media, I will continue producing cartoons.

The group exhibition series, "[Kiss the Ground](#)" in which my work has appeared, may travel to other venues. This would be a great way to keep public dialogue going.

I would like to see art galleries that promote social and political dialogue host exhibitions of

artists who represent non-establishment perspectives about, for instance, conflicts in the Middle East. Such exhibits could include the works of cartoonists such as Khalil Bendib, Carlos Latuff, Arend Van Dam, and others. And me, if I'm lucky.

What's your message to the future, younger generations of Diaspora Armenians?

For the first time, today's Armenian youth are growing up without Genocide survivors in their midst. As a result, they are experiencing a greater disconnect with the history of their people.

To them I say: stay active in your local Armenian communities. Develop friendships with others of Armenian descent. Travel to Armenia, Artsakh and other Diaspora communities. Read our ethnic community news. Stay engaged. Bring your talents and creativity to your community. Don't let cultural assimilation and globalization separate you from your roots. Today, people are looking at digital technology to develop platforms for our youth to learn our endangered Western Armenian dialect. If the Wampanoag Native American tribe in Massachusetts, for instance, can bring its all-but-extinct dialect back to life as it has, so can we.

What are your hopes and dreams for the resolution of the Armenian Genocide question?

There can never be a full resolution to the Armenian Genocide question since the dead—and many lost cultural assets—cannot be brought back.

I do not seek apologies from Turkey. Genocide acknowledgment by itself is immaterial for my own personal closure or healing, but I can speak only for myself. If such apologies by Turkey included a show of remorse through restorative justice, however, then we may be on the road to a just resolution.

Today's so-called reconciliation movement is not about restorative justice. That's what I wish for—restoration of our land and culture so that we can reclaim our homeland and practice our heritage. Diasporas cannot survive indefinitely. We are living on borrowed time.

If given the opportunity to live in a free, independent Western Armenia—present day Eastern Turkey—would you be willing to move and live on your ancestral lands? Why?

Absolutely yes. Why? Because, as my father the writer C.K. Garabed has stated, "Any time a people are separated from their indigenous lands, we will also regrettably see a departure from the native culture. It is difficult to authentically replicate that culture without environmental reinforcement, and it requires formidable effort to resist the influences of a new dominant culture that might not always be preferable or superior to the old one."

A free, independent Western Armenia is a cherished dream and goal. However, history has shown us that occupied Armenian lands will not simply be handed to the Armenian people. While some Russian politicians have lately been talking about the need to break up "modern" Turkey and return Western Armenia to Armenians, is Russia willing to facilitate this and potentially go up against Turkey and NATO? A recent article by David Ignatius in the Washington Post talks about the growing possibility of a civil war in today's eastern Turkey, where Kurds remain repressed by Turkish authorities. If war breaks out, who knows what will

happen on our ancestral lands?

Are we Armenians prepared to physically fight for these lands? And if we succeed, are we prepared to live among potentially hostile groups? After all, today we are seeing so-called 'hidden' Armenians in Dersim, Turkey apply for citizenship in Armenia because they are discriminated against in their own historic homeland.

New Armenian transplants to Western Armenia could face the same fate as ethnic Armenians who were murdered in recent years for seeking social reform just as their ancestors before, during and even after the Genocide. We must also recognize that Kurds claim many of the same lands we do. And we must understand that the people who today occupy confiscated Armenian homes—such as the ones belonging to my families in Sepastia (Sivas) and Dikranagerd (Diyarbakir)—may not give them up willingly.

Today, Turkey and Russia are again at odds, just as they were 100 years ago. Azerbaijan attacked Artsakh and southern Armenia in April 2015 and has Turkey's blessing. We must be prepared to defend our patrimony and be ready to take advantage of the situation should the winds of war change the reality on the ground. No one expected the USSR to fall and yet it did. Are Armenians prepared to rise to their homeland's defense and/or move into action should Erdogan's neo-Ottoman Turkey fall apart?

April 2016